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(title)

If you went into your phone settings and looked at your daily screen time, how high is that number? How about compared to how much human-to-human interaction you've had today? If that ratio is greatly skewed towards your phone, chances are you're not alone. Cell phones, and digital technology in general, have taken up such a large space in our lives and have altered the level of importance that we assign to human interaction. Sherry Turkle, a social science professor at MIT, takes the stance that technology has a harmful effect on people's ability to have meaningful conversation and their levels of empathy in her essay titled, "The Empathy Diaries," and urges the reader to "reclaim conversation" (352). I believe this is entirely possible, despite the massive role that technology plays in the 21st century. The process of reclaiming conversation starts with each individual's personal growth and their conscious effort to strive for better habits

When discussing how a sense of self can impact conversation with others, Turkle writes, "In solitude we find ourselves; we prepare ourselves to come to conversation with something that is authentic, ours. When we are secure in ourselves we're able to listen to others and really hear what they have to say. and in conversation with other people we become better at inner dialogue" (347-348). The idea that Turkle is proposing is the interconnection between one's relationship

with themselves and one's relationships with the people around them. The more comfortable somebody is being on their own, the more they will have to offer in their interactions with others. Once someone is secure in who they are, they are more likely to have open and vulnerable conversations, and also be able to truly listen to others in conversation, because they are not caught up in their own insecurities. I agree with this quote, and I feel that it is a point that few people bring into this conversation about how technology impacts conversation. I have noticed in my own life that when I was younger (around 14/15), I had a very hard time making friends. I would always have my headphones in at school and was either listening to music or on social media, doing anything I could to make sure no one would talk to me because I didn't know how to carry a conversation. Around my junior year, I realized that this behavior was not healthy, and I started to put my phone down more and opted for less technology-focused hobbies like reading and origami. These hobbies gave me a lot of time to be by myself in silence, and I learned a lot about who I was. This was the first year that I had a solid group of friends, and I was able to be myself and have amazing conversations with them. I was able to break out of my technology-obsessed ways and turn into a secure, productive person, and I did so by focusing on myself and found joy in solitude, away from my phone.

Encouraging genuine conversation is hard, especially when it feels like you're the only one trying. However, once the expectation of being present and vulnerable is set, the behavior shift is inspiring, as seen when Turkle points to a heartfelt example, "Despite the pull of our technology, we are resilient. For example, in only 5 days at a summer camp that bans all electronic devices, children showed an increased capacity for empathy as measured by their ability to identify the feelings of others by looking at photographs and videos of people's faces"

(348). She also references the fact that they have, “nightly cabin chats” (348), which further shows that not only is the empathy of these children improving, so is their ability and desire to have conversations with each other, despite being essentially strangers. This anecdote made me hopeful for future generations, and proves that future generations aren't as reliant on technology as we perceive them to be. They just seem that way due to the fact that they have overwhelming access to it. Once they are removed from that access and are encouraged to make connections without the crutch of technology or social media, they thrive in that setting. I resonate with this story because it is something that I have seen in my own life as a young adult. I went on a camping trip as a precursor for my college’s orientation, and on this trip cell phone use was very discouraged, but not banned. On the first day of this trip, it was very awkward having to participate in activities with people who I’ve never met before, and who didn't seem like people I could see myself getting along with. But, as the trip went on, I made some of the best connections with these people that I've ever had, and I am still very close with many of the people that I met on that trip. It is an experience that I will remember forever, and I fully believe that the lack of access to cell phones made it so memorable and enjoyable. If I had seen these people on Instagram before meeting them in person, I would've had a preconceived opinion about them that would have inhibited my ability to empathize with them. Instead, I got to know them on a deeper level than shallow first impressions, and form a true connection. Furthermore, without the easy distraction of being on my phone, I was forced to interact with these people and create friendships with them, which in turn made me improve my social skills and helped me flourish when I went into college. This encouragement of human connection and discouragement of the digital world led me to develop better habits that have better shaped me as a friend, and as a human overall.

Beyond self improvement, it is also the responsibility of the individual to notice this behavior in one's peers, and do their part to correct it swiftly. The detached and apathetic behavior that can be developed from the reliance on technology starts from a very young age, which is supported by Turkle when she recalls, "[The seventh grader] was almost robotic in her response. She said, 'I don't have feelings about this.' She couldn't read the signals that the other student was hurt. These kids aren't cruel. But they are emotionally developed" (345). While I share the sentiment that these kids aren't inherently hateful; that this behavior is a result of declining empathy in the age of rampant digital technology. However, I disagree with the idea that this is a sign of emotional underdevelopment. In my own life, I have noticed that children often hide behind a mask of apathy to seem cool and unbothered by the world around them. They think that if they don't care about anything, it makes them seem more mature than their peers for leaning into a healthy emotional response. I know this is true because I was a kid that acted like this, as well as a summer camp counselor that notices this behavior increases the older kids get. I also have noticed that this behavior is magnified on social media, as there is a strong rhetoric that being secure in your emotions and the hobbies you enjoy is embarrassing or "cringe." As their brains start to develop, this idea will solidify if it is all they are being exposed to on the internet, so it is up to older people, such as parents, siblings, and authority figures, to help them unlearn the ideas put into their head by social media, and show them there is more to life than what the internet tells them is "cool."

In summary, the 21st century's inundation with technology has had detrimental effects on the traits that make us human, such as empathy and genuine communication. But it's not too late.

The responsibility lies on us to open ourselves up to the awkward conversations in the elevator, the late-night debates with our families, and reflections on life with ourselves, instead of mindlessly rotting away on our phones and computers. Only then, will we take back the true meaning of conversation.

Works Cited

Turkle, Sherry. "The empathy diaries: a memoir." *Emerging: Contemporary Readings for Writers*. Edited by Barclay Barrios, Florida Atlantic University, Penguin Press, 2022, pp 343-352.